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SUBJECT: Engaging Sao Paulo's Muslim Communities: SMRC Pandith's Visit

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CLASSIFIED BY: Thomas J. White, Consul General, State Department,
Consul General; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) Summary: Sao Paulo offers unique possibilities for Muslim engagement, many of which were evident throughout Special Representative to Muslim Communities (SRMC) Farah Pandith's November 22-23 visit. The major Sunni and politically moderate Muslims were delighted to receive SMRC Pandith and eagerly shared with her several of their flagship institutions, including the elaborate Santo Amaro Mosque, a Muslim School that serves a 60 percent non-Muslim student body (Islam is an elective course), and a vigorous interfaith group supporting the Abraham Path Initiative. Sao Paulo's Muslim moderates worry about the rise of fundamentalism and Hezbollah influence among more recent waves of largely Shia Lebanese immigrants, as they promote a broadly tolerant vision of "modern Islam". Their own community remains quite traditional, with women's and youth organizations limited. Even so, the traditional leadership's eagerness to engage, acute awareness of the dangers of radicalism, and their solid achievements in integrating Muslim and Brazilian identities make them an excellent example of how a unique MMC (Muslim Minority Community) has, by and large, carved out a positive space within a diverse Latin American country. Post will seek Washington support to bring down a U.S. Sheik to help reinforce our engagement efforts as a concrete follow-up to SMRC Pandith's highly successful visit. End Summary.

Special Representative Farah Pandith's Visits Sao Paulo

12. (U) Special Representative to Muslim Communities (SMRC) Farah Pandith visited Sao Paulo November 22-23. During the visit, she met with a number of representatives of the city's Muslim Communities, visited the Santo Amaro Mosque (the largest mosque in the city) and visited an attached Muslim school, and attended a reception organized by the Muslim Federation in her honor where Pandith spoke about the USG's engagement plans and took questions. SMRC Pandith also gave a press interview to the major Sao Paulo daily "Folha de Sao Paulo" in which she told her story as an American Muslim. The Sao Paulo Muslims who received SMRC Pandith, the bulk of them moderate Sunnis, reacted enthusiastically to her visit and expressed eagerness about future engagement opportunities.

Working the Lebanon Connection

13. (U) SMRC Pandith began her visit by attending the Lebanon National Day reception, a 1500-person gala organized by the Lebanese Consulate and held at Sao Paulo's prestigious Lebanese Club on November 22. The majority of Arab and Muslim immigrants to Brazil are of Lebanese background and this event offered wide ranging opportunities to interact with various members of the community, including Sunni, Druze and Shia Sheiks as well as Muslims working in business, politics and law enforcement.

The Santo Amaro Muslim Community

14. (U) SMRC Pandith visited the Santo Amaro Mosque and associated school November 23. The local Muslim community built the Mosque, usually attracts 300-350 worshippers on any given Friday, with assistance from Saudi Arabia. The community also has an Egyptian cleric who helps with the Mosque's ministry. The mosque is the spiritual centerpiece of a complex of institutions, including a Muslim high school and a soon-to-be opened nursing school. The high school houses 600 students, sixty percent of whom are non-Muslim (many on scholarships) and the study of Islam is an elective. Mohammed el Zoghbi, President of the Muslim Federation that sponsors the school spoke with particular pride of the Santo

Amaro Muslim Community's efforts to do good works that benefit all Brazilians. (Note: The Muslim Federation is a moderate Sunni group. It is one of several such groups that vie to become an umbrella organization for all of Brazil's Muslims. End Note) El Zoghbi noted that the school provides a strong, affordable educational alternative for young Brazilians living in a "peripheral" area of the city. (Note: The Santo Amaro Mosque and Muslim School are located in a middling to poor neighborhood in a highly socially polarized city. End Note.) The Federation is now also constructing a brand new nursing school on the same grounds. It will have a 1200-student capacity and is programmed to open in January.

A Direct Dialogue with Youth

15. (U) SMRC Pandith met with a cross-section of Muslim students, both male and female, from the high school. The young people reported no real difficulties with anti-Islamist sentiments in Brazil. Instead, they said that frequently other Brazilians simply do not understand Islam and are puzzled by the students' religious affiliation. A number of the young women lamented how stricter Islamic customs - the prohibition on drinking, for example - made it difficult for them to socialize with non-Muslim Brazilian teenagers. Overall, the group was friendly and highly accessible. The kids evinced interest in learning English and showed obvious knowledge of U.S. pop culture. None had ever been to the United States.

The Abraham Path

16. (U) The Lebanese Consul General, Joseph Sayah, hosted a coffee for SMRC Pandith where she met Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders who are all behind the Abraham Path Initiative in Brazil. Founded by Harvard Professor William Ury, the Path program promotes a unique kind of Middle Eastern tourism. It encourages Muslims, Christians and Jews to re-trace Abraham's journey in an effort at encouraging contemporary reconciliation between the world's three great Abrahamic faiths. While the Brazilians behind this initiative help facilitate Middle Eastern travel, they also undertake activities in Sao Paulo. They told SMRC Pandith about a recent "Friendship Run" they had sponsored that brought together Muslims, Christians and Jews together into one very positive public event. Joseph Sayah was incredibly interested in being useful to

our mission. He saw the value of the new position of the Special Representative and provided SRMC with many ideas about engagement with Brazil's communities but also more broadly how USG can make an impact using the President's Cairo Speech. He was enthusiastic about the focus on youth and took SRMC aside to personally present his dedication to helping the US government take advantage "of this moment in time" and the "goodwill" out there for the President and our efforts to engage with Muslims.

¶17. (C) Brazil's Abraham Path sponsors share the overall global goals of the initiative, but they are also impelled by strongly local concerns. As Salim Saheen, a Lebanese Brazilian banker and Maronite Christian, told SMRC Pandith, "Hezbollah is gaining [adherents]," particularly with more recent Shia Lebanese immigrants. Consequently, the moderates want to "push back against the radicals" by promoting popular interfaith activities.

Muslim Federation Reception

¶18. (U) The Muslim Federation organized a 40-person reception for SMRC Pandith at her hotel on November 23. The SMRC spoke to the group about Secretary Clinton's vision for the US Department of State and the way she has asked us to engage with Muslims. SRMC talked about the new paradigm of engagement based on mutual

interest and mutual respect. She spoke about the focus on the next generation (which was met with great enthusiasm) and she mentioned the upcoming entrepreneurial summit -- to urge guests to suggest names to post of dynamic and successful young entrepreneurs to be considered. SRMC also highlighted post plans to educate Brazilian Muslim applicants about our consular procedures and our desire to bring down an American Sheik. Attendees responded very favorably to Pandith's remarks and several speakers suggested that both Brazilian Muslim business persons and students would welcome greater travel opportunities to the U.S.

Comment: Beginning a Relationship

¶19. (C) Post's Muslim engagement remains a work-in-progress. Sao Paulo's Sunni-Lebanese Muslim majority is generally a very conservative traditional community in terms of family structure and both youth and women's groups remain nascent. At the same time, Sao Paulo's Sunni Muslim leaders are well aware of the dangers of radicalization, which they have seen grow among the more recent flows of poorer, Shia Lebanese immigrants. In response, they are actively promoting a tolerant "modern" Islam that highlights good works to benefit all Brazilians, regardless of faith. In this, they are reproducing patterns of inter-faith comity from Lebanese history prior to the 1970s and leveraging Brazil's own home-grown tendency to broad cultural tolerance. This results in an overall series of Islamic communities that - while not entirely insulated from radicalization - have strong interfaith connections and live-and-let-live traditions.

¶10. (C) Engaging Sao Paulo's Muslims with follow-up programs (like a visit from a U.S. Sheik) would help bolster mainstream Islam in Brazil, highlight the importance of freedom of religion in America, the diversity of Islam in America and debunk the myths that exist about Islam in America. Moreover, such engagement would reinforce the Sao Paulo Muslim community's efforts to share its experience in interfaith relations and general good works with other Muslim communities around the world. For this reason, Brazil merits its own MMC strategy (a Muslim Minority Country strategy) that builds on the efforts of a generation of Brazilian Muslims who have become adept at forming a Brazilian Muslim identity and founding successful institutions that are at once thoroughly Muslim and genuinely Brazilian. END COMMENT.
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